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The outing of J. Edgar Hoover

HISTORY SOMETIMES has symmetry.

"He was wearing a fluffy black dress, very fluffy, with flounces and lace stockings and high heels and a black curly wig," according to a woman quoted by British writer Antony Summers in a new book on J. Edgar Hoover, the mercilessly homophobic director of the FBI. "It was obvious it wasn't a woman; you could see where he shaved. It was Hoover."

For half a century as the nation's most powerful cop, Hoover was only too willing to investigate, expose, persecute or blackmail individuals who could be accused of homosexual behavior or left-wing political views. Now that he has been safely dead for 21 years, the Summers book joins other reports of Hoover as a closet gay.

It's not exactly fair, but it's justice: Unproven gossip was just the sort of character assault that Hoover himself had turned into an art form during his half-century as the nation's chief crime fighter.

Many people wondered why Hoover seemed to ignore the Mafia. According to the Summers book, photographs of Hoover as a transvestite in company with his longtime aide Clyde Tolson came into the possession of organized crime bosses Meyer Lansky and Frank Costello.

During those years, according to FBI records, Hoover ordered agents to compile an estimated 300,000 pages of "sex deviate" reports that ruined reputations and destroyed careers of thousands of people.

Among them was a file on the late Illinois governor, Adlai Stevenson, the Democratic presidential nominee in 1952 and 1956. Although the candidate was described by his biographer as "decidedly heterosexual," the index card calls him a "sex deviate" — and the file itself quoted informants as saying he was known as "Adeline." These reports were secretly leaked to press and politicians by Hoover, who preferred Dwight D. Eisenhower.

Now we hear that Hoover was a transvestite. What goes around, comes around.